

**STATEMENT OF
BRIAN E. LAWRENCE
ASSISTANT NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR
OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MAY 12, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.2 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the needs and performance of the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS), and the state grant program that funds Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs).

Among the basic tenets of the DAV is the principle that our nation's first obligation to veterans is the rehabilitation of men and women injured as a result of military service. Certainly, quality health care and adequate compensation occupy the highest tiers of the needs hierarchy, but for most individuals, full rehabilitation cannot be attained without opportunity for gainful employment. Disabled veterans face significant challenges obtaining suitable employment upon separation from the military. VETS was established to help overcome such challenges by providing employment services and opportunities, and protecting veterans' employment rights. VETS accomplishes its mission by means of the programs discussed below.

DVOP/LVER

DVOP/LVERs are valuable resources to help disabled veterans make the difficult and uncertain transition from military to civilian life. They help provide jobs and job training opportunities for disabled and other veterans by serving as intermediaries between employers and veterans. They maintain contacts with employers and provide outreach to veterans. They also develop linkages with other agencies to promote maximum employment opportunities for veterans.

The DAV was among the strongest advocates for the establishment of this program. Our continued support is illustrated by resolutions adopted by our membership each year during the DAV National Convention calling for adequate funding for the DVOP/LVER program.

Despite the overall success of the program, the DAV is concerned that certain state employment centers have assigned duties to DVOP/LVERs that are inconsistent with the VETS mission. DVOP/LVERs should be exclusively dedicated to serving veterans and should not be farmed out to help other agencies at one-stop employment centers. Disabled veterans deserve to have employment representatives who are trained specifically to meet their unique requirements.

The DAV recommends that VETS be given stronger oversight ability to ensure duties assigned to DVOP/LVERs are consistent with the goal of providing employment opportunities to veterans.

As such, the DAV is opposed to the Administration's WIA Plus legislation. WIA Plus would provide funding for DVOP/LVERs through a "consolidated grant." Once the funding is integrated into a consolidated grant, VETS would lose all oversight as to how the money is actually spent. WIA Plus would give VETS "sign off" authority on state plans, but thereafter the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) would control the grant and the oversight that comes with it. The DAV has no confidence that ETA, which has a dismal record of serving the needs of job seeking veterans, would ensure that responsibilities assigned to DVOP/LVERs are consistent with their intended purpose. VETS must have oversight authority to ensure that states do not disregard their own plans and use DVOP/LVERs improperly.

The DAV believes that WIA Plus would effectively abolish the DVOP/LVER program in the short term, and eventually become the demise of VETS altogether. Once the DVOP/LVER grant is turned over to ETA, there will be very few functions left for VETS.

The DAV strongly opposes WIA Plus.

National Veterans' Training Institute

The National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI) was established to develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. NVTI provides consistency of training to ensure veterans receive a uniform, high quality level of service throughout the country.

The Independent Budget (IB) for fiscal year (FY) 2006, co-authored by DAV, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and AMVETS (American Veterans), expressed concern that several years of level funding, along with reduced appropriations for FY 2005 compromises the vitality of NVTI and its ability to provide quality training. In accordance with the IB recommendation, the DAV encourages the Subcommittee to recommend an adequate level of funding for NVTI to ensure quality training for veterans' employment specialists.

Transition Assistance Program/Disabled Transition Assistance Program

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is a coordinated effort between DOL, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Defense (DoD), to assist military men and women during their transition to civilian life. A second component of the program, the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP), helps servicemembers separated for medical reasons.

TAP/DTAP classes provide information regarding VA benefits, employment and job training assistance, such as resume writing and interview skills, and information about other available resources.

The DAV is pleased with the overall effectiveness of TAP/DTAP. Since it began, hundreds of thousands of veterans have benefited from TAP/DTAP counseling, assistance, and educational and employment opportunities. TAP and DTAP programs provide an obvious benefit to veterans and their families, but they also benefit our entire national economy. With shorter time spent in the transition process, veterans quickly become contributors to the gross national product, and drain fewer resources through utilization of unemployment benefits.

The DAV was encouraged when Public Law 108-103, the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003, mandated that TAP/DTAP programs be established at overseas military installations. However, the Act neglected to provide additional resources that would allow VETS to fully and expeditiously make the implementation. The DAV recommends that such funding be provided to VETS to ensure that servicemembers transitioning from overseas military facilities have the full benefit of this important program.

Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) gives members of the National Guard and Reserve who are called to active duty the right to return to their civilian employment with all the benefits they would have accrued if not for their military service. USERRA also prohibits employers from discriminating against members of the armed forces. Both private and public employers must adhere to USERRA requirements. VETS is responsible for investigating complaints from individuals who believe their rights have been violated. Usually, VETS attempts to negotiate voluntary settlements of USERRA issues, but may recommend legal action in certain cases.

The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004 mandated that employers provide notice of USERRA rights, benefits, and obligations, with a notice in a prominent place frequented by employees. The DAV is pleased that VETS, in a prompt fashion, has made such a notice available in poster format for employers to download from the DOL web site.

Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program

The Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) is an employment services program established to help homeless veterans reintegrate into the labor force and attain financial independence. HVRP assists homeless veterans via grants to state and local Workforce Investment Boards, commercial agencies, and non-profit organizations, including faith-based and community-based organizations. Qualified agencies directly assist homeless veterans with job placement, training, counseling, and resume preparation.

The DAV is very supportive of HVRP and other homeless veterans' initiatives. It is an unfortunate and sad fact that many veterans, for various reasons, have been unable to make their

way in the society they swore to defend. Such veterans exist without decent shelter, adequate nutrition, or medical care.

Services provided by HVRP can mean the difference between a veteran living on the streets or living in transitional housing until they are capable of providing for themselves. As a member of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), the DAV supports the testimony and recommendations submitted by the Coalition on April 15, 2005, to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies. Therein, the Coalition urged Congress to appropriate at least \$50 million for HVRP in FY 2006. This amount would enable HVRP grantees to reach approximately 24,000 homeless veterans.

In addition to legislative advocacy on behalf of homeless veterans, it is important to note that the DAV takes an active role in seeking to prevent and end homelessness among our nation's veterans. The DAV Homeless Veterans Initiative, which is supported by our Charitable Service Trust and Colorado Trust, promotes the development of supportive housing and services to help homeless veterans become productive, self-sufficient members of society. Since 1989, DAV allocations for homeless projects have exceeded \$2 million.

Closing

The DAV commends the hard work and dedication of the VETS staff here in Washington, and DVOP/LVERs throughout the nation. Their efforts have made a profound impact to better the lives of thousands of disabled veterans. The DAV views the spending of resources on the programs discussed today as an investment in our nation's future economic vitality.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present our views on these programs. The DAV applauds the Subcommittee's efforts to provide better job training and employment services for veterans. We appreciate your concern and support and look forward to working with you on future issues of importance to disabled veterans.